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TAGS: PHUM PGOV UZ

SUBJECT: UZBEKS TO "TOLERATE" HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH FOR THREE MORE MONTHS

REF: A. TASHKENT 782

1B. TASHKENT 804

Classified By: AMB. JON R. PURNELL, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

11. (C) Summary: Only a week after denying an accreditation to Human Rights Watch's Tashkent office director, the Foreign Minister reversed the decision and offered her a three-month accreditation. At the same time, a Human Rights Watch assistant received a visa after a year-long wait, and the Foreign Minister said that the organization's Central Asia Regional Director could receive a visa to visit Tashkent. This sudden "generosity" toward Human Rights Watch was correctly interpreted by many in the Tashkent diplomatic corps as a transparent attempt to win EU approval as the Europeans prepare to decide May 14 whether to extend or alter sanctions against Uzbekistan. End summary.

12. (C) On April 21, barely one week after the Ministry of Justice denied Human Rights Watch office director Andrea Berg a new accreditation, effectively expelling her from the country (ref A), Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov personally called Berg into his office and reversed the decision. According to Berg, Norov indignantly told her that she had committed flagrant violations of Uzbek law and had damaged Uzbekistan's international reputation with biased reporting about the country's human rights situation. Nevertheless, he said, he would grant her a new three-month accreditation. Berg quoted Norov as saying, "We will tolerate you, as long as there are no more violations."

13. (C) Berg told Poloff that Norov also agreed to grant a visa to Human Rights Watch's Central Asia Regional Director, who has had an application pending for several months. The Ministry also approved a visa--valid for three months and two entries--for a new Human Rights Watch assistant, a U.S. citizen whose visa application has been pending for approximately one year. The assistant plans to arrive in Tashkent during the week of April 23-27. Berg told Poloff that Norov flatly refused to grant accreditation to Berg's husband.

14. (C) The government's treatment of Human Rights Watch has complicated the European Union debate over the future of its sanctions against Uzbekistan. The EU is scheduled to decide May 14 whether to continue or alter the sanctions. Human Rights Watch local staffer Umida Niyazova still awaits trial on charges of smuggling, illegal border crossing, and threatening state security; her trial was abruptly delayed on April 19 as it was about to begin (ref B). Several European

diplomats told the DCM that they see the sudden decision to grant visas and accreditation to Human Rights Watch staffers as a transparent, short-term gesture to win support for a lifting of sanctions.

¶5. (C) Human Rights Watch, for its part, has embraced its role in the evolving drama. Details of Berg's meeting with Foreign Minister Norov quickly appeared in wire service reports. Human Rights Watch invited leading human rights and opposition political figure Vasila Inoyatova to Brussels, where she lobbied EU officials to maintain or strengthen sanctions against Uzbekistan. After her return to Tashkent, Inoyatova told Poloff that she would not be surprised if the government released Umida Niyazova from custody as a further bid to win EU leniency. However, she said, dozens of other human rights activists remain in jail. She characterized them as "hostages," which the government will gladly trade for concessions from the West. Inoyatova said, "They'll just arrest someone else tomorrow."

¶6. (C) Comment: Post agrees with our diplomatic counterparts that the government's sudden "generosity" towards Human Rights Watch is not motivated by any interest in promoting human rights, but instead is a cynical gesture designed to manipulate EU opinion and assure the lifting of EU sanctions.

However, Human Rights Watch is not helping its cause by taking the debate to the public. Broadcasting details of its talks with Uzbek officials will only antagonize the government further.

PURNELL